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Portrait of the artist as CBC radio comic

by Henry Mietkiewicz

There's only one way for radio listeners to improve on Lorne Elliott's forthcoming hour of standup comedy on CBC: Clip the photo with this article and tape it to the radio when Elliott comes on.

Then try to imagine him on stage with one lanky hip cocked to the side and his ample jaw curled into an ironic grin, as a spotlight plays hide-and-seek amid the frizzy expanse of his bird's-nest hairdo. Got the picture. Good. Now add the voice - almost melodic in its bemusement, but warm and amiably confident - and you've got a full portrait of the artist on CBC Radio (AM 740) Saturday at 4 pm on 'Definitely Not the Opera.' Ultimately, Elliott's voice overcomes the lack of visuals, as it deftly animates, a wry and folksy performance whose largely mainstream material never succumbs to blandness.

In the process, CBC makes a promising start to its four-week miniseries of Saturday afternoon comedy. Coming up on March 18 are Eric Tunney, Skippy's Rangers and Peter Wildman followed on March 25 by Bowser and Blue, and by the Chumps on April Fool's Day.

"Radio can be a good medium for me" Elliott said in a phone interview from his home in Hudson, near Oka, Quebec, "I don't think it matters too much that listeners can't see what I'm doing. The most important thing is to have taped the show for a live audience, as this one was (last November at the CBC Broadcast Centre). My work depends on connecting with the audience and I count on radio to capture that link".

If anything is different on radio, it's the musical content of his act. To lend variety to his CBC hour, Elliott plays more of his own novelty songs than in a regular stage show. And even though his material includes occasional references to the Canadian political circus, Elliott says he prefers to focus on the wickedly amusing miseries of every-day life.

"I enjoy using some of the timely stuff because it means I'm actually talking to the audience about something that matters at that moment. For the most part, though, the jokes I'm proudest of are the ones I know will be funny 10 years from now."

For instance, Elliott's seaside agonies: I don't tan, see, I burn and peel. Leaves my skin nice and white and irritable for re-burnin'. My whole vacation - bum, peel, burn, peel. End of the week at the beach, I own seven red leather jumpsuits."

On proselytizers: "Jesus freaks keep comin' up to me and they always seem to have the same rap - 'I used to be screwed up on drugs, I used to be screwed up on booze, but now I've found Jesus and I wanna share Him with you.' Hey, gimme a break! You never shared your drugs or booze."

On brain power: "Psychologists say we only use 10 per cent of our mental capacity. I thought that was pretty clever. Then I thought, if that's true, whoever said that, there's a 90 per cent chance he's wrong."

In a sense, Elliott says, his late '70s entry to comedy came through the back door. "When I was on stage with a band in Newfoundland, there was a long tradition that when the bass Player tuned up, somebody else would tell a joke. And when I told jokes, I found people were listening more closely than when we were playing.

"At that time, it was sexy to be in music, but not hip to be in comedy. But I was smart enough to realize there was something special about a joke that couldn't be copied with music. Pretty soon, I also realized the entertainment industry didn't really know what the audience wanted, which is usually the case".

This year, Elliott's writing and staging *The Pelley Papers*, a comedic series of six interconnected one-act plays, each running about half an hour.